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ON READING ALOUD

BY MURIEL HARRIS

Is reading aloud merely a dead-and-gone Victorian manifestation with green rep for its shroud, mahogany for its coffin, a chandelier to toll its parting? Does it belong in an age in which stuffed birds and woolwork have only now achieved the romance of history? Was it even then just a fashion, or was it also the expression of a period which, beside the gross materialism of mechanical invention, the sanctity of possession, yet had a sense of direction, of uplift, a sense, perchance, of rightness, upon which a humbler—even a humiliated—world to-day looks back upon with awe and wonder? For, despite the Darwins and the Huxleys, the Victorian era was an era of belief. Even the Victorian atheist *believed* that there was no God. Belief in science was itself a religion. The arid doctrine of Mill filled his disciples with faith in rationalism, while the Ruskins, the William Morrises, the Passmore Edwardses, believed, actually believed—and thousands believed with them—in a humanity which could be reached by the good, the true, the beautiful, were it only set before them. The Oxford movement, the sanctity of work, the worthwhileness of things (even the smallest things), the struggles of the pre-Raphaelites, the Comtists, the Tolstoys, the Thackerays, to get back to first principles, long overlaid by smothering convention, all these things constituted a new faith in man, in the regeneration of man. And with the regeneration of man came the regeneration of woman. And with the regeneration of woman came the education movement, the bringing of the library into the drawing-room. The Lydia Languishes of this world dropped out. Reading aloud came into its own again from the days of Milton. And if it sometimes was but a competitor with water-color drawing and woolwork, and even a loser beside the art of getting married and having an establishment, yet there it was—a means of communication and expansion in the Victorian home, a garden gateway to

the flowers of the mind. In so far as it reached its apotheosis in the Victorian era, thus far was reading aloud a Victorian institution; in so far as it was one of the signs of a great revival, just so far did it express the expansion of the strait Victorian soul.

There were of course many causes for the universality of reading aloud in the cultured Victorian home. The rise of the English novel alone produced a picture of life, easily understood by the many, with the popularity of which perhaps the cinematograph to-day alone is comparable. The Victorian era had at its disposal all the harvest of the great preceding century, from the strong meat of *Tom Jones* to the delicate flavor of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. For the hyper-refined, there was that paragon, Sir Charles Grandison. For the young-lady public of the circulating library, who more entrancing than "Evelina"? The hope, the romance, the belief of the nineteenth century itself, were reflected by the Reades, the Eliots, the Stevensons, the Daudets, the Brontës, and a score of others. Nor was the edge taken off the appetite for literature by the hors d'oeuvre of the short story or the magazine. Fanny Burney was read at length in every home. Victor Hugo might have written ten great volumes of *Les Misérables* instead of five. The Dickens numbers made every bosom palpitate in the little towns which watched for them at the weekly readings. And they might go on and on, so eagerly were they read, like the stories of the paladins in the Sicilian puppet-shows, on every winter evening—ending with a snap at the critical point, whetting the appetite for more—not unlike the serial detective stories on the cinematograph, which always leave the young woman in mid-air or mid-water until the following performance. Not the eagerly expected war-books or sensational revelations from the Versailles Conference ever created a public such as that of the Victorian drawing-room, eagerly awaiting the evening reading.

Reading aloud of course opened a door to women far more than to men. While the novel held the floor, educated women, who are now old, will tell you that most of their education was derived from reading aloud after dinner or after tea. And where you are expert in economics or social history, they will know their Gibbon and disapprove of Ferrari; and where

you are an enthusiast for "vers libre," they will know their Scott, their Tennyson, and, above all, their Browning; possibly, too, their Homer and their Vergil. And where you will flaunt your personal freedom and plain-speaking, they will suggest the dignity, the poise, of their own generation, the flavor of its reticences, the sense of human dignity which belongs to their generation. Perhaps the past is always golden. What was—what is—really the magic of reading aloud?

One thing it is not. It is not theatrical. Actors rarely read well, because they are too personal. The reader who endeavors by his expression to interpret character is intolerable, a bore. For one thing, he is usurping the function of the author, plagiarizing his descriptions and explanations. On the other hand, personal traits in reading—really personal to the person and not to the character—sometimes can lend ineffable charm. It may be the way the hand holds the book; the way the reader settles himself to read. Perhaps it is a lace ruffle, a cameo bracelet, a trick of nervousness in starting. Sometimes it is a humorous intonation. "*And* the Lord said unto Moses," read the Squire and invariably cleared his throat after getting an impetus by accentuating the *and*. Everybody would have missed that "*and*." There was something solid and comforting about it. You knew where you were. And it was above all entirely personal—unlike the convention of the Dickens reader, whose regular sentimentalities were on a level with the "little che-ild" of the melodrama and soft music and the like. The professional reader is rarely a success just because he has not the opportunity to convey this personal impression. Voice again counts enormously, but rather in a negative sense. It is the forgetting of the voice that counts, not its emphasis. And this is perhaps natural in that the complete merging of the book and the reader produces a single effect, which would be confused by the existence of a double element. Most readers gravitate naturally towards the books in which they are most able thus to merge themselves. While a man will read Shaw, a woman will read Trollope. Two of the best readers in England were Dr. John Bridges and Mrs. Frederic Harrison. The one read Jacobs and history; the other, *Framley Parsonage* and *Sir Charles Grandison*. I have to-day an

unforgettable vision of the dashing Lady G. and her "marmoset," of the "sprightly and accomplished Miss Byron," who could never, never, be persuaded to name the day, who only at Grandmamma Selby's "Harriet—my love" stepped forward, blushing to tread a measure with Sir Charles. And it is unforgettable because it is interwoven with a personality, gracious, dignified, steeped in French and English Memoirs, with a background of Turner and the France of the Seventies and Herbert Spencer and Thiers and Garibaldi and the rest; because it recalls a beautiful voice and an atmosphere of books and old china, the flashing of an emerald ring, endurance, self-restraint—an odd mixture of gentleness and iron, those Victorian women—of ignorance too, and of accomplishment as we understand it to-day. An odd mixture, once more, of prudishness and broad-mindedness, which could comfortably read *Tom Jones* aloud, but as imperturbably say "um—um" as it skipped the undesirable pages. Not one of them could have understood a Stock Exchange transaction and their minds had been trained to close automatically at the sound of the word "business." But most of them spoke French beautifully, and many of them could listen with pleasure to Goldoni in the original. Most of them could converse easily with the foreigner, and there was far less of the barrier of nationality which to-day obscures our meanings. And it came out in their reading, for they read with a background not merely of national but of international culture; it came out in the modulation of their voices, and it came out in their presence, tranquil, reticent, self-possessed.

In an age of haste, leisureliness is become a charm—a charm that is kept in a museum, to be sure, but a charm none the less. It had its dull side, counted in the stitches of the woolwork and patchwork, of which the merit was that they took years to finish. But while the dulness is forgotten, the fragrance remains; also a certain stateliness. Leisureliness has a measure, a rhythm, while haste stumbles and wastes. Leisureliness has values; there is no value in haste—only a lack of poise. And reading aloud had of all things to be leisurely—as leisurely as a patchwork quilt or curtains of the finest netting. It had to have time for the savoring. Possibly, like other appreciations, it helped in the creation

of good writing. Dear Fanny Burney must have responded to the Piozzis of her day; certainly George Eliot expanded in the sun of universal appreciation. When Dickens was a household word, there was something worth while for which to write—very different from our hurried fluttering of pages, when beloved books no longer open of themselves at a love-scene of a Rochester and Jane, or the three-cornered duel of a Marryat. It was cause and effect and effect and cause, the two acting and reacting upon each other to the greater stimulus both of reading and of writing.

The mere charm of words is underrated to-day. Half our words are never pronounced at all except in conversation. The amazing verbal subtleties and rightnesses of a Stevenson, a Conrad, are lost—most of them—in the haste and the silence in which they are read. We never hear them with their rhythm and their shading—the same rhythm which attracts old gentlemen to mouth the *Æneid* with gusto to a non-appreciative second and third generation. Perhaps this subsidence of the poet from the palmy days of Victorianism to the straggling efforts at revival of our day is in some measure due to the decline in reading aloud and the growing meaninglessness of such phrases as “the music of words.” Only the few know how to read poetry at all, because they think it must be declaimed, shouted, chanted, danced, anything but read. And thus we never get the full translation of the author’s mind. The Victorian periods, measures, seem to us ridiculous, and we have transferred them, say, to dancing, which gets all the color and the rhythm, and in its turn, perhaps, will become as meaningless. For words need to be used, to be articulated. Beautiful speech, beautiful voice modulation, is hardly ever an affair of nature alone, certainly not of deliberate neglect. Words form an instrument to which constant practice alone gives results. And there is the measure of the thing as well. Just as the Paladdin puppet-shows and cinematographs alike recognize the need for stimulating by restraint, so with reading aloud, there are restraining limits, a beginning and an end, a time and a place, most of all a personality, without which the pleasure vanishes. There is no sitting up all night to finish it: dramatic, but feverish; delicious but self-indulgent; accounting for the unsatisfactoriness of many an end. Books cannot be spoilt, even with the increas-

ingly long sessions, by a peeping at the end, a rude prying into the author's intention, before he wishes to disclose it. Courtesy towards the author has at least something to do with the charm of his book, and here the reader is omnipotent, and can manipulate his climaxes, keeping you breathless as D'Artagnan rides to the coast; or he can so suppress himself that his own dryness underlines George Birmingham's whimsical humor and his inimitable portrayal of the Irish character. Reading aloud holds the listener up, restrains him, cultivates his zest, and then rewards his restraint and anticipation in full measure. Who does not know the cold dead feeling of finishing to yourself a book that was begun aloud, the deadness, the loss of color and relief? It involves all the difference between seeing the sights with a lover, and seeing them with Baedeker. And then there are the other listeners, too. Crowd psychology comes in here. There is a difference between listening to a book alone, and listening to it mirrored equally in the appreciations of other people. Here again this raises all the values, doubles the reflections, makes the book as intensely living as it is possible for it to be.

Apart from its intrinsic qualities, there is no doubt that reading aloud is associated with traditions which color and captivate our imaginations. Nineteenth-century scholarship read aloud with zest, and nineteenth-century scholarship has no mean roll of names. And then—Tennyson used to read his own works down at Blackdown, with its purple-crowned heights and its wide view of the Sussex Weald. Christina Rossetti read her poems, and charming Grant Allen his stories. At Rye, city of the fairy-tales, or at his flat on the Chelsea Embankment, Henry James would utter himself to a select few. Old Archbishop Whateley educated his "accomplished" daughters by reading to them aloud; while in the families of the Lushingtons, the Hobhouses, the Trevelyans, reading aloud was part of the day's routine. And always it was associated with those mellow firelit hours after tea, with the Victorian drawing-rooms, whether of Winterhalter or of William Morris, of willow-patterns, or of fret-work and white marble. And you traced idly the roses on the Aubusson carpet, or the hawthorne of the china vase, or—yes, it must be admitted—the plush snake round the bottom of the glass-cased clock, and you

watched the lamplight shine softly on a silver head, or light up the "Salve Roma" of a Victorian bracelet; and—yes—there was a perfume, too, of warmth and flowers and leaves of old books and scented leather; and all unconsciously, you wove them into stories of the worldly Archdeacon Grantley and his daughter Griselda, of Mrs. Proudie, for whose downfall you longed, but lamented when it came; of windmill fighters and Micawbers equally, of the romance of the Victorian age and the realism of the Edwardian; of Shaw and his Other Island—and a hundred others. And forevermore the stories became inseparable from that golden border-land where perhaps, alone, different generations can meet as one; inseparable from a special winter's evening when the red curtains were drawn early; inseparable from the moment when at last you hurried up to dress, still walking on clouds which remained substantial till the next ones displaced them. Reading aloud still exists, and *Caesar and Cleopatra* has a place with *Julius Caesar*. But so much exists besides. There is the making of many stories easily obtainable; there is the transformation of the school into something more like home, yet not like home, in which reading aloud has a place, though a different place. There is the greater knowledge of actual facts with less left to the imagination, and with it, the unutterably perplexing task of selection. So that reading aloud is far more of a function than an art; more definitely educational than just enjoyable; a competitor—generally at a disadvantage—with the quicker methods of the cinematograph, of nature-study, of reading alone; a little old-fashioned in a world of the entirely new. And so it has fallen away, and some of its magic has gone, and it actually does belong to a period which can never be real again. Its personalities are less personal and its coloring is less mellow, and those who enjoyed it realize that while it remains, its atmosphere has gone. At its best, it belongs now to those "good old times" which none of us ever appreciated until they were gone.

MURIEL HARRIS.